

Under the influence? Helen's drug from Homer to *Omeros*

Oliver Thomas

Oliver Thomas investigates the history of a mind-altering drug mentioned by Homer, a quest which takes him from Istanbul to St Lucia by way of coffee, pitcher plants, early psychotherapy, and a thousand-line Latin poem on the virtues of tea.

When Telemachus reaches Sparta in *Odyssey* 4, he finds in Menelaus an emotionally volatile king struggling to work through the turmoils of the Trojan War. The young Telemachus is already nervous of grand society, and embarrasses himself immediately. His first words in book 4 are a whispered comment to his friend Pisistratus about Menelaus' 'divine' interior décor, but Menelaus overhears and subjects the pleasantries to a remarkably severe critique. The conversation goes from bad to worse when Menelaus makes a *faux pas* in turn, with his comment that his bitterest grief comes when he remembers... Odysseus.

The jovial wedding feast has abruptly turned sour. Enter Helen, who 'presently cast into the wine from which they were drinking a drug, one free of grief or anger, making one forget all one's worries. Whoever gulped it down once it was mixed in the bowl would not shed a tear down their cheeks, at least for that day – not even if his mother and father should die, or if men should cut down his brother or beloved son with bronze in front of him while he looked on. Such cunning drugs did the daughter of Zeus have – beneficial ones which the Egyptian Polydamna, the wife of Thon, had given her' (*Odyssey* 4.220–9). The conversation turns to stories about how successfully Odysseus infiltrated Troy, and though it doesn't cheer Telemachus up much, at least the tears seem to stop.

Wonder drug or allegory?

Readers of the *Odyssey* have also fallen under the spell cast by Helen's drug, often labelling it 'nepenthes' (the adjective meaning 'grief-free', applied to it alone in the *Odyssey*). Homer was often treated in antiquity as the origin not only of Greek ethics but also of Greek science. Readers therefore attempted to identify which Egyptian plant Helen had used. Diodorus (a Sicilian historian of the 1st century B.C.)

remarks 'the poet clearly had precise experience of the nepenthes drug... since even now people say that the women in Egyptian Thebes can deploy that power'. That's very naïve: presumably the story that Diodorus had heard about Egyptian potions is explained by the *Odyssey* passage rather than vice versa. But Diodorus wasn't alone. The finest Greek doctor, Galen (2nd century A.D.), dismissively mentions a popular belief that a particular mood-enhancing root corresponds to Helen's drug. Later, in the 11th century, the scholar-monk Michael Psellus gives an explicit recipe: 'Nepenthes is composed of the plant "horse-crazer", Cretan purslane, henbane, and belladonna.'

Not all ancient readers took such a literal approach. Already before 500 B.C. there was a tradition of taking Homer allegorically, and this approach was applied here too. A 5th-century B.C. thinker, Antiphon, set up an early counselling service in Corinth, advertising 'nepenthes' chats, which would talk you through any grief. He alludes to the unique Homeric adjective, but reapplies it from drugs to conversation. The idea that Helen's 'drug' was something like 'good conversation' reappears in various ancient sources, including the beginning of Plutarch's *Dinner Party Questions* (ca. A.D. 100 – the work that gave us 'Which came first: chicken or egg?'). The great 12th-century accumulator of ancient scholarship on Homer, Eustathius of Thessalonica (Saint Eustathius, left, if you're Greek Orthodox), also thought 'it is better to interpret more symbolically': for him, Helen's drug represents 'friendly company'.

Nepenthes in the Renaissance

The ancient debate about how to identify Helen's wonder-drug was picked up and reworked by Renaissance scholarship, like so many other aspects of Greek

thought. For example, on February 7th 1615 Pietro della Valle (1586–1652), a Roman who conducted remarkable travels throughout Asia, wrote to a friend from Istanbul about how impressed he was with coffee – a drink little known in Italy at that time. Since it came from the direction of Egypt and was so central to leisure-time, he concludes 'if it were drunk with wine, as it is drunk with water, I would be so bold as to suspect that it could be Homer's nepenthes'.

Less than a decade later, Pietro Lasena of Naples (1590–1636) wrote a whole book entitled 'Homer's Nepenthes'. After displaying his erudition about mood-enhancing drugs, he argues that Helen's is not realistic, and should be seen rather as an allegory – but not of consoling chat, since it prevents one becoming upset as well as sedating grief. Lasena interprets 'nepenthes' as an allegory for a philosophical mindset for dealing with grief, but argues that Homer alludes in the scene as a whole to less high-minded sources of happiness, such as looking at Helen's pretty face. One of the many interesting digressions in this free-wheeling meditation on happiness is a mention that Neapolitan quacks of the time sometimes labelled their dodgy potions 'nepenthes'.

Anyone for tea?

'Homer's Nepenthes' is also the title of a posthumous book by the Frenchman Pierre Petit (c. 1617–1687), whose principal fame for classicists is that he rediscovered the main manuscript of first-century Roman author Petronius' famously snobbish account of a millionaire's dinner party, the *Cena Trimalchionis*. Petit trained as a doctor, and while he begins like Lasena, with a survey of mood-altering plants and the difficulty of equating any of them with Helen's, he uses Homer as the springboard for a discussion of how happiness works physiologically. Both halves of his work culminate in paeans on tea. Petit really liked tea, to the point of composing a 1000-line Latin poem about its virtues in just four days (for more on Latin poetry of the modern era, see Mark Walker's article in this edition). If you want a modern-day

nepenthes, he says, forget Della Valle's silly interest in coffee.

Petit's book of 1689 represents one way in which the scientific developments of the 17th century affected interpretation of Homer. In the same year, a quite different approach to 'nepenthes' was taken by the Dutch botanist Jacob Breyne (1637-97), who named the species of pitcher plants (right) 'Nepenthes'. Why he did so is unclear: perhaps he disapproved of the racy earlier name *Priapus vegetabilis*. But we do know why the great Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707-78) decided to accept the name, which still stands. In 1737 he wrote 'I have taken over Breyne's nomenclature, since even if this is not Helen's nepenthes, it certainly will be one for all botanists. What botanist, upon finding this marvellous plant after an extremely long journey, would not be seized by wonder and entirely astonished, and forget his past troubles while he gazed dumbstruck on the miraculous hand of the Creator?' Linnaeus' exuberance is remarkable: besides the accumulated words expressing amazement, notice the 'extremely long journey'. The botanist will find nepenthes during an 'odyssey'! Breyne and Linnaeus, confident that they did not need to reserve 'nepenthes' for an as yet undiscovered match for Helen's drug, transfer it to a plant which preserves the spirit of wonder induced by the *Odyssey's* passage, rather than the precise medicinal effects.

Homer in the Caribbean

The influence of 'nepenthes' nowadays is global, for instance as the witty name of an Australian winemaker. My final example, however, comes from one of the most brilliant recent reworkings of Homer, *Omeros* by Derek Walcott (b. 1930). Walcott's epic (published in 1990, just before he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992) transfers Homeric motifs into the world of fishermen on his native St Lucia, and uses classical references to explore the influences of both European poetry and European slave-trading on the Caribbean.

Early in the poem Philoctete, whose intractable foot-wound keeps him from fishing, seeks solace in the No Pain Café run by Ma Kilman: he is 'a mummy embalmed in Vaseline and alcohol' sitting 'in the Egyptian silence'. Ma Kilman tries to recall her grandmother's herbal medicine for such wounds: 'Where was this root? What senna, what tepid tisanes, / Could clean the branched river of his corrupted blood?' (ch. 3.3). Much later (chs. 47-9) she finds the plant and prepares it using the shamanistic methods of her grandmother. 'No Pain Café' recalls 'nepenthes' both in sense and sound; Ma Kilman's name, 'Egyptian' and 'mummy'

(and perhaps 'branched river') point to Helen's acquisition of nepenthes from the Egyptian queen Polydamna (literally 'Kill-many'). Walcott picks up on Homer's notable praise of African culture in *Odyssey* 4, but later reorients us via St Lucia's connection to a different tradition of African medicine, namely the obeahs of West Africa; Philoctete's 'blood' is 'corrupted' by both the slave trade and his wound.

Furthermore, Walcott seems in 'root', 'senna', and 'tepid tisanes' to allude to some of the previous influence of 'nepenthes' – Galen's comment that some thought it a root, Pietro Lasena, and Petit's obsession with the tisane tea. This reminds us that the influence of the source Homer is a continuous 'branched river', rather than a well into which different authors dip independently at different times.

Oliver Thomas is currently a Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge, and has worked on Homer, Aeschylus, and child language acquisition in Ancient Greece. From February 2014 he will be teaching at the University of Nottingham.